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ABSTRACT

At a small liberal arts college, interviews were conducted with 24 current employees who had graduated from the college. The study was intended to be a source of insight into why these individuals enrolled at the school and why they stayed at the college. An additional focus was on how student affairs and academic affairs staff collaborated on issues that have applicability anywhere. The interviews were a rich source of insights about the student experience. Most of these students felt that faculty and peer relationships had helped them decide to stay at the college, and those who said they had never thought of leaving felt comfortable on campus and thought that they were making good progress toward their goals. Some issues are identified for the college's Enrollment Management Commission, including the concerns of black students and commuter students, the role of extracurricular activities, and the educational environment. The interview protocol is attached. (SLD)

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Tapping the Employee-Alumnus: The Loyal Alumni View of Why Students Stay

The following documents provide a summary with supporting materials of a roundtable presentation made at the annual meeting of the Virginia Assessment Group in Charlottesville, Virginia on November 3, 1993.

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Title: Tapping the Employee-Alumnus: The Loyal Alumni View of Why Students Stay

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Tapping the Employee-Alumnus: The Loyal Alumni View of Why Students Stay

Session Abstract: At a small liberal arts college, a study was conducted of 24 current employees who had graduated from the college. The study was to be source of insights into why these individuals enrolled and why they stayed. Primarily, we related how student affairs and academic affairs staff collaborated on a set of issues that have applicability anywhere.

Session Description: After briefly describing our study and distributing a qualitative summary of results, we go immediately to the implications that we derived. We then invite discussion among roundtable participants. What follows are the implications for action that we distributed to our Enrollment Management Commission. We will use this document as a touchstone for discussion.

Ideas for the EMC to consider based on these interviews:

The interviews are a rich source of insights. From all the points made, only a few can be acted upon at any single time; otherwise, attention becomes diffused and ineffective. What criteria should be used to select ideas to channel our initiatives?

Suggestions: 1. The idea should have an important link to retention. 2. The idea should be supported by data and experience. 3. The idea should be action-oriented rather than speculative. Concrete actions rather than more research (although that is not ruled out) can be most profitable if they meet these criteria.

Here is a selection of ideas:

1. Black students need more role models.

2. Have a focus on the persistence of commuter students. In the absence of a Commuter Office, what are equivalent ways to fill needs of commuter students. Find out what makes commuter students tend to stay. Reinstate the Commuters Around Campus group or a similar body.

3. Extracurricular activities are important as shown by the generally great amount of involvement of these employees. But there needs to be coordination of student activities, getting the maximum out of the efforts of the various groups, offices, etc. There also might be a plan to cope with student changes and increasing patterns of noninvolvement. Practical suggestions to help students include having more social events and providing more transportation to off campus sites for activities.

4. Focus on the College's reputation and what builds reputation as a source of student pride. Deal directly with the issue of selectivity, how and under what circumstances it should be raised,

and what the impact would be upon our more average students. This is related to the identity question (see number 12 below).

5. Is there a malaise in residence halls? Determine the impact of the housing policy on current students and see how it might be modified.

6. The caring atmosphere and sense of community are important or key characteristics of the College emphasized by these employees. The one-on-one relationships with faculty fall in that category as well. What can be done to assure that there are no students who are ignored or feel that they are ignored and are not important?

7. Resurrect an exit interview process and develop ways to harvest good information from such data.

8. Involve students regularly on the EMC. Although the EMC is a faculty commission, make sure that perspectives from admissions and student life continue to be considered.

9. Emphasize why students stay. Don't focus only on reasons why students leave. Publicize the positive patterns and stories of those who have stayed.

10. Look at special categories of students and their retention rates and glean specific information that can apply to all students. For example, it was suggested that Study Abroad students tend to be retained more successfully than average. Not everyone can be a Study Abroad student, but we can learn from such examples. Also look at students who excel in community service, PORTfolio students, and other categories.

11. Take a good look at entrenched categories that separate students: adult/day, commuter/resident etc. What can be done to override, if not eliminate these categories.

12. Look at the question of the College's identity as brought out in the strategic plan. What kind of a college is our college trying to become and how does that goal play among prospective students and their parents?

WHAT IS A LOYAL ALUMNUS (of Virginia Wesleyan College)?

A loyal alumnus is a graduate who readily acknowledges the unique contributions of Virginia Wesleyan in his/her personal and professional growth and one who has maintained an active interest in the college. He or she is one who:

A) understands and appreciates the value of a liberal education
B) valued the education received and believed it was of high quality and an excellent investment
C) was satisfied with experience as a student
D) had a minimum of unresolved issues, grievances or unmet needs
E) appreciated the services received and efforts made on his/her behalf
F) appreciates current benefits of being an alumnus/alumna and takes advantage of them
G) believes his/her degree (if applicable) is highly regarded
H) maintains ties with VWC to extent of ability (distance and opportunity)
I) supports VWC in appropriate ways.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: STUDY OF FORMER VIRGINIA WESLEYAN COLLEGE GRADUATES/EMPLOYEES

INTRODUCTION–
Let me briefly review what we are doing. The emc (explain if they don't understand) is using several ways to better understand why students come to Virginia Wesleyan, why they stay, and why sometimes they leave. One of the methods that we decided to use was this one-on-one interview approach. I am interviewing you because you graduated from VWC and are a current employee. The idea is that you might have a different perspective on these questions than others have, whether you graduated recently or quite some time ago. (Say if appropriate: In your case, since you graduated quite a while ago, we would be interested in your perceptions of why students leave or stay might have changed.)

First, let me ask some background questions:
BACKGROUND QUESTIONS--
When was your graduation date from Virginia Wesleyan?

Were you an employee of VWC before or only after you received your degree?

--If you were an employee, were you employed part-time as a student employee or work-study student? Or were you a full-time employee while taking classes?

–If you were an employee only after receiving the degree, how soon after graduation were you hired? (If appropriate): What did you do in the time between graduation and being hired?

–(If appropriate): Has your service at VWC been continuous since you were hired?

Do you remember when you first considered enrolling at VWC. When was that?

Was VWC the first college, or did you transfer? If so, from where?

At the time you entered, were you also considering enrolling at any other colleges? Which one or ones?

What were the most important factors leading you to enroll at VWC?

When you went to college, did you think you would continue until you earned a college degree? If so, where did you first think you would earn the degree? When did you first become fairly certain that you would earn the degree from VWC?

When you look back on your time at VWC, what experiences were most valuable or positive to you? Which ones seemed like a hindrance or waste of time?

What activities (intercollegiate sports, intramurals, clubs, volunteer, church-related, etc.), if any, did you become involved in? Describe your level and frequency of involvement?

How many close friends did you have among your classmates (persons you would spend time

with and go to different places with)?

How many faculty or staff did you get to know well?

Among your student friends or those whom you knew well, how many did not continue their studies and either dropped out or transferred? Do you remember what happened in any of those cases? Can you describe one case that you think you understand why the person left? In what ways was that person's experience similar to yours? In what ways different?

Did you ever discuss with your family or friends the possibility that you might want to drop out or transfer? If so, what led up to that discussion? What was the nature of your doubts about staying? Did you ever leave for a time? If so, why?

If you never really considered terminating your studies at VWC, why do you think you never did? Was there a point when you knew you would probably complete your studies at VWC? What made you sure of that?

Were you ever concerned about your academic performance? Were you ever worried that you might fail a course? If so, what in particular helped you through this time?

Were you ever concerned that you or your family might not have enough resources to allow you to continue in school?

While you were enrolled at VWC, what did you like most about being here? What did you like the least?

(If you have been here for a long time): What, if anything, do you observe has changed about the students who are enrolled here compared with students when you were taking classes? What do you think the college should do, if anything, to accommodate?

Is there anything that you would like to emphasize that you have not brought out already? In particular, what would you advise the emc regarding how best to understand why students stay at CNU and why they sometimes leave?

Interviews Conducted for the Enrollment Management Commission

Subjects: 7 males and 17 females

Grad years: Grads before 90s = 4; grads in 90s = 20. Median graduation date was May '95.

Categories: Four subjects were employees before, during and after time at VWC. Eight were commuters all four years. Ten were residential all four years. Two started out residential and became commuter.

Most (non-employees) graduated in 4 straight years.

Work: Most worked as students.

Lag between graduation and employment at VWC: The median time was 1-2 months.

Employment during the lag period (for the ½ where there was a lag) was varied:

When enrollment was first considered:

Employees (before, during and after, called here Employees) (N = 4) all considered pursuing the degree as soon as they came to work.

Others considered enrolling at VWC during junior or senior year of high school (senior is more typical).

Transfer institutions:

Among transfers, the transfer institutions were Longwood, TCC, Chowan, Richard Bland, ODU, and 1 other unnamed.

Other colleges considered in Virginia:

ODU 6; William & Mary 4; Virginia Tech 2, and the rest 1 apiece: Mary Washington, Washington & Lee,

GMU, RMC (Ashland), JMU, VCU, and Averett.

Colleges considered outside Virginia: at least 18.

Factors named as affecting choice of VWC (excluding Employee category):
Good impression, admissions contacts, etc.: 14
Friendly atmosphere: 5
Financial aid: 8
Small size: 7
Area: 6
Personal—family/friend/boyfriend: 6
Courses/academics: 3
Others (1 apiece): recommendation /encouragement, study abroad, baseball, credits transferred, short commute.

Factors affecting choices in Employee category: Paid for, convenient, (one case needed a little boost).

Future plans upon entry:
Overwhelmingly, they planned to graduate from college. Almost all of them were sure about VWC or believed they would most likely graduate from VWC from, or almost from the beginning.

Most valuable or positive experiences (descending order of frequency):

1. Academic challenge, one-on-one with professors, good education/experiential learning etc: 26
2. Activities: 10
3. Residence life, relationships (not specifically profs.), community: 9
4. Work experience while attending: 8
5. Orientation: 2
6. Small campus: 2
7. Study Abroad: 2

Misc. (1 apiece): MacArthur Fellowship, feeling safe, United Methodist connection, January field trips

Less valuable or positive experiences (descending order of frequency):

1. Activities: lack, not enough space or facilities, funding: 7
2. Residential issues: 6
3. Personal schedules involving work and study: 3
4. January term: 2
5. Freshman seminar: 2

Misc. (1 apiece): library, group assignments, lack of school spirit, knowing about resources, place to drink, lack of privacy, gap between commuters and residential, some offices less friendly.

Activities—on campus or campus-sponsored (descending order of frequency):
Student Government Association: 6
Intramurals: 5
Frat/sorority: 3
Social events (not in a sponsoring group): 3
Habitat: 2
Math club: 2
Athletics: 2
Circle K: 2
Political Science club/honor society: 2
RA/Residence Hall Association: 2
Radio: 2
Internships: 2
Newspaper: 2
Tutoring/mentoring: 2
Other community service: 2
UMC representative
Misc. (1 apiece): history honor society, psych club, French Club, Spanish Club, Alpha Phi Omega, Bacchus, Cigar club, African American Society, Commuters Around Campus, Pacesetters (ASP), choir, chamber singers, International Awareness Council, student-teacher association, Phi Alpha Theta, SEAL, Model UN (equivalent), homecoming, scholarship selection committee

Activities—off campus:
(1 apiece) Navy affairs & representative, babysitting for church, officer in Res. Halls Association

Relationships that were close:

Close friends: median about 5
Faculty: median about 7
Staff: not always mentioned. Most knew some; some knew a lot.

Dropouts:
Knew or were aware of dropouts: 75%
Knew enough to describe or attribute causes: 66%

Why persons left (number of references):
Finances: 8
Family-related: 7
Transfer to a university with desired major (or dislike of a prof.): 3

Academic problems: 3
Pregnancy: 2
Misled as to expectations: 2
Misc. (1 apiece): non-academic dismissal, lack of social life, independence issues, become professional athlete, attend bigger school, eating disorder, husband job transfer, not enough black role models, perpetual student hanger-on, general location of college.

Similarity to own case: Not much evidence of similarity. Most who said anything reported "not similar."

Ever discussed terminating studies?
Yes: 11 (Almost half had some thoughts about leaving at one time or another)
But only 1 actually left for a period.

Nature of doubts leading to consider dropping out:
Finances: 4
Academic problems: 2
Social life: 2
Misc. (1 apiece): roommate problem, general attitude toward college, trauma over death of loved ones, panic attacks.

What or who helped them stay (if they had any thoughts of leaving):
Faculty/staff: 3
Friends/peer support group: 3
Job/financial support: 2
Meeting people, having positive experiences: 2
Improving grades: 1

Those who'd never thought of leaving explained:
Felt comfortable; leaving never crossed their mind; they had no thoughts of it; academics and activities were good; and there was a good fit and good progress toward goals.

Point of certainty as to staying: for most it was in freshman year, many very soon into first semester.

Academic performance concerns:
8 or 33% had some concerns at some time.
7 or almost 33% had failure concern.
3 or 1/8 actually failed a course or took a course over to improve grade.

Supports during academic difficulty (if any):
There were 5 comments:
4 mentioned faculty
3 mentioned friends
1 mentioned staff

Financial concerns:
--Concerns affecting the possibility of dropping out: 4 or 1/6.
--Other concerns: 3 or 1/8 mentioned a constant need to work/patch together jobs/balance studies and work.

Liked most (short response):
People/caring/community/relationships: 15
Academics—career prep/relationships with faculty/learning/education/small classes: 21
Misc. (1 apiece): activities, work-study, "all of it", academic requirements reasonable, size of school, personal accomplishments

Liked least (short response):
Activities: 6

Resident al issues: 3
Lack of privacy: 2
Particular courses or lack: 2
Misc. (1 apiece): personal schedules involving work and study, tuition, some profs are not approachable, academic dishonesty, fatigue, long classes on T-TH, lack of commuter involvement, change in the Grille.

What has changed with our students?
Less initiative, less proactive, more apathy: 7
Not much difference: 6
Less involved socially and in community: 6
Take school and services for granted/expect to be catered to: 4
Less intellectual, less academic, need more help: 4
Not as respectful, rude: 2
Misc. (1 apiece): not as responsible, less often in trouble (connected to zero tolerance), more religious, more drug use (but health-conscious—somewhat of a paradox)

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Notes Regarding EMC Interviews

Factored by Gender:

* males exhibited what appeared to be a wider range of choices in considering colleges ...all had alternatives indicated whereas females had a high number that only were interested in VWC..in light of other items, noted later on, it appeared that males had a greater freedom to decide where they wanted to go and females were more likely to "lock in" on their initial decision.

* in noting factors which were important in their decision to choose VWC, females tended to indicate more relational factors (boyfriends, family close etc.) with men indicating more pragmatic factors (financial, transfer of credits etc.)

* men exhibited more delay in finalizing decision to stay at VWC..females knew within the first semester in many cases while men often took till the end of the first year (we again wondered about the more pragmatic freedom to rule out VWC shown by men and the tendency for women to "settle in" and make VWC "home" once here)

* in noting positives, males tended to indicate work (work study, job in grille, work in res.life etc.) with less emphasis on academic factors, which were more evident in females responses.

* in noting negatives, males tended to more readily come up with responses and seem more skeptical or pragmatic..more men indicated problem with "fluff" programs that weren't seen as practical, particularly J-term.

* it appeared that being involved in activities or having a role was particularly important ..many of the females were active but a fairly large number were not and it appeared that relational factors and feeling "at home" played a big role for them.

* in citing cases of friends leaving school, men were often less clear in perception of "why"..females tended to remember more clearly the motivations.

* a greater proportion of the men felt the threat of failure either in school as a whole or in one class and actually exhibited higher proportion of failure in a class than women.

* in relation to generally looking at factors which increase retention (likes-dislikes) ..females were more likely to consider academic factors and relational/academic role of relationships with professors first..males start off in noting pragmatic concerns, then relational and academics shortly behind.

Factored by graduation year:

* only major trend noted was in examining perceived differences between college students "then and now"...most differences were noted by graduates '96 and before, with few noted by graduates in the past four years..so if cultural change has occurred it appears likely to have been in last four years or so.

Factored by Resident/Commuter Status:

* as would be expected, resident students general concerns showed more of a focus on resident life issues.

* resident students exhibited a wider range of choices in noting other colleges they had considered..commuters looked at colleges in this area, indicating more of a connection to this geographic region.

* a significantly higher percentage of resident students had considered terminating their studies..(postulated that commuters might be motivated by financial factors to "stick it out" as they might be paying themselves or be living with parents who were)

* residential students showed a higher percentage that were worried about failing and they also indicated higher percentage of actual experienced failure...the responses indicating fears of having to leave due to finances were all within the residential population..none in the commuter population.